

Selkirk's Deal In Rubber

By GEORGE ETHELBERG WALSH

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SELKIRK had been sent south to look after the American Rubber company's interests in the interior of Honduras, and after two months of the most exasperating exploration through the swamps and woods of the lowlands ten miles back from the coast he was free to confess that he was not in love with the job. Besides the risk to one's life from fevers and ruthless cutthroats, the pay was hardly commensurate with his ideas of his usefulness. It seemed like two years instead of two months since he had seen a white man or a civilized home, and it was good to gaze at the blue expanse of the sea again and even at the dismal mud and thatch houses of Amapala. Only that morning he had returned to the coast, and his expectant eyes had scanned the sea eagerly for a steamer, but he had been disappointed and then rejoiced at the report that the isthmian steamer was due in two days.

"I'll arrange to return on her," he had said abruptly, expressing his thoughts aloud. "I'm sick of these infernal wilds and people."

The American consul, a small, dried up man whose sallow complexion indicated long residence in the tropics, shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Selkirk looked at the man in pity and added, "And you stay here right along?"

"Twenty-five years now," was the laconic reply. "I suppose I'll die here too. One place is about as good as another."

Then, turning brusquely toward his desk, he added: "Selkirk is your name, isn't it? Yes, I have some mail for you. Here's a letter marked important. It was brought on the last steamer."

Selkirk looked over the letters. Some were business communications, others from home and friends, but the one marked important was from his employers. The rubber company's name was plainly stamped on the outside. He tore it open rapidly, scanned its contents in a few vivid glances and then swore mildly under his moustache.

"I won't do it! I swear I won't! I'd die there!" shouted Selkirk breathlessly. "They are a set of—"

Then he stopped and flung himself in the only vacant chair in the hot, dingy office. He looked up helplessly at his companion. "They want me to go back—penetrate deeper into the rubber forest. There is something in the wind. Somebody else is after the rubber, and they say I must return and get ahead of them. I won't do it! No, I won't!"

The very thoughts of returning to the dismal interior made him faint, and yet—

"The black Caribs of the interior know where these forests of big rubber trees are located. You must bribe, coax or threaten them to reveal the secret. If you get ahead of the other company—an English one, by the way—we will make it all right with you on your return."

This extract from the letter ran through Selkirk's brain, and then at the end was a promise to give him a part interest in the profits if he was successful. But a horrible nightmare of fever, marshes and black natives stealing out of the bush and grinning fiendishly at him made him shiver.

"No, I won't do it!" he shouted.

He lingered two days in Amapala, repeating over every time his spirits

"Thank God, there's another white man in this infernal place!" shouted

woods!" Then when the steamer from the isthmus hove in sight he was in a fever of doubts and anxieties. When she touched the port he ran out to meet her. Another man disembarked. He talked rubber from the moment he landed until Selkirk lost sight of him.

"He's after the rubber, too," sententiously remarked the American consul. Selkirk stared, held his breath and then bolted from the office. Before night he was on his way back to the interior, carrying with him only a light traveling outfit and two guides who had accompanied him on his former trip. He knew that it was a race between the English and American companies, and Selkirk felt his native American pride urging him onward.

But the Honduras forests and swamps are the worst in the world to get lost in, and before they were two days out from Amapala the guides appeared hopelessly tangled in a tropical jungle. Selkirk swore at the stupidity of the native guides and tried to find his way out by studying his chart.

Then a queer thing happened. They suddenly plunged out of their dismal forest fastness into an upland opening with a score of native huts in full view. But more surprising than these huts was the appearance of the natives grouped under an immense ceylon palm eagerly gesticulating and talking to a white man. Selkirk gave a little impatient grunt and ground his teeth in rage. Before him was the English agent who had landed at Amapala two days before.

"They say we're prisoners," the guide mumbled humbly, "and we must give up our weapons. They are bad men—bad black Caribs." Then in a frightened whisper, "They eat white men sometimes, and—"

Selkirk laughed harshly. "You tell them I'd give them indigestion if they should eat me. Besides, I'm not their prisoner."

"How can we get out of this hole?" murmured the Englishman. "I wish I'd never come here."

"What did you come for, anyway?"

"Because I was a fool. Some English rubber company sent me to explore the interior to locate rubber forests. I didn't know. I was fooled."

Selkirk did not reply. He was quietly watching the natives. His two months' experience in the interior ought to help him in the present emergency. He had heard stories of the wild black Caribs. They were not bad at heart, but if they took it into their heads that they needed a human sacrifice for their religion they would spend their last drop of blood to accomplish the end.

Selkirk talked a few minutes with the leaders of the Caribs through his guides and then once more addressed the Englishman.

"I won't do it! I swear I won't! I'd die there!"

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the Englishman, rushing forward and grasping Selkirk's hands. "My name is Brandywine. I think we met in Amapala. These wild fellows want to eat me or something. Can you understand their lingo? My guides deserted me a day ago; stole everything I had except this blanket, my rifle and—"

The wild black Caribs interrupted them. They had been talking to Selkirk's guide, and they were now demanding a hearing.

"What do they want?" demanded Selkirk to his native guide. Then, in a side tone to the Englishman: "You can't trust any of these treacherous guides. They'd sell you for a dollar and kill you for a piece of gold."

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"They demand a sacrifice. One of us must be offered up, and the other can return to the coast."

"My God! A sacrifice? A human sacrifice?"

"Yes. To please the wrath of some of their gods," coolly replied Selkirk.

"It's terrible! Monstrous!" shouted the Englishman, the drops of perspiration appearing on his forehead. "What can we do? You don't propose yielding to them. I'd rather die fighting than—"

"Being roasted alive? Well, so would I. But one of us can escape, and it is folly to sacrifice both lives."

Brandywine's face was livid, and his hands trembled violently. His eyes bulged from their sockets as he stammered, "You mean that we should—should draw lots to see which one—"

"We might do that," laconically interrupted Selkirk.

"I—I—my family—my dear wife and child," muttered the Englishman.

Selkirk suddenly stiffened. "You have a family—wife and child?"

"Yes; the best that ever lived. She did not want me to come out here. It was my pigheadedness, she said—"

"That makes a difference. I could not draw lots with you. I have no family—no wife or children—only a—"

"Sweetheart; some one waiting for you to—"

"No, not that; she is not waiting. I fear she does not care."

There was a bitterness in the tone which made the Englishman wince. Instinctively he held forth his hand. Selkirk grasped it, squeezed it a moment and then said: "I'll stay. You can go back to the coast. No one will miss me."

"No, I couldn't do that—desert you."

"You must. One life lost is better than two. These people are ignorant and superstitious, but they are honest in redeeming their word. If they promise they will take you back safely to

the coast, and then you can reach Amapala and the American consul. Tell him all, and if—"

He stopped. The Englishman blinked and held back a tear. "I understand," he said hoarsely. "Give me her name and address. I'll do it and tell her all. She'll despise me, but she shall know how brave and self-sacrificing you were. I—"

Selkirk scribbled a name and address on a sheet of paper. "There, keep that, and if I should ever escape I'll see how well you redeem your promise."

"I'll— But, my God, how can I leave you to such a fate? Roasted alive—and eaten! I can't! I can't!"

"Oh, I won't mind it. I can take my own life at the last moment if need be. Now, goodbye. They are waiting to escort you to the coast and me to their infernal prison and roasting spit."

They shook hands again, but as they turned to separate Selkirk added: "By the way, you say your name is Brandywine and that you represent the British Honduras Rubber company. But what were you trying to do in this God forsaken region?"

"Trying to enrich the company by finding a new forest of rubber trees—sacrificing my life to their greed."

"Indeed! That makes it all the more necessary that you should return to the coast and report the danger to prevent others from trying it. Where was the new forest supposed to be located?"

"Way up on the west banks of the Segovia, ten miles from a settlement of Indian Caribs near its source. Here is a map the company gave me. But it's all Greek to me. I thought these Carib guides could direct me."

Selkirk gazed at it musingly, and when he handed it back he said, "Good-bye and good luck to you!"

Brandywine replaced the map in his pocket and seemed greatly affected. The black Caribs stood around them in warlike dress. Selkirk said briefly to

his guide: "Tell them to guide him back to the coast. I'll stay."

Selkirk watched them disappear, a mournful expression on his face, and then when they were no longer in view he smiled. Taking a match from his pocket, he struck a light and puffed away at his black pipe.

"That will get him out of the way all right," he said reflectively. "And that map was a good one—better than mine. I must get up there in a hurry."

Then in native Carib jargon he said to his guide: "We'll start at once. We must go up the Segovia in canoes. How far are we from the river?"

"Ten miles," was the quiet answer.

"Heavens! Ten miles of this infernal forest? Well, get some guides who know the way thoroughly. If we are not there by tomorrow, I'll shoot somebody. Understand? No trickery, or your life will pay for it. And if

we succeed there'll be gold for you and this rifle and everything I have in the outfit."

The native guide understood and bowed gratefully. Selkirk watched him narrowly and muttered: "He'll do. I don't think he dare betray me."

Half an hour later he was moving in the opposite direction from that taken by the Englishman and his escort. The fear of roasting alive seemed to have escaped his mind entirely. Once or twice he laughed softly to himself.

Two weeks later, when Selkirk appeared at the American consul's dingy office at Amapala, he was greeted cordially by that sun dried individual. After a few words of welcome he asked:

"How about the Englishman? Did he return all right?"

"Yes. He left for the States on the next steamer. A fine trick you played him. He ordered me to send a relief expedition after you at once. I think when he reaches the States he'll have a fine story to tell. But I've anticipated him by cabling to the state department. I knew you would return."

"It was rather a mean trick to play, but I'm not sure but I saved his life. He might have died in the swamps."

"Yes, he might have had that luck. And so might you."

"Oh, I'm different! I'm used to it. I've knocked around the world more than he has. But I wonder if he will deliver the message to—to—"

The American consul laughed. "Yes, he had her name and address. He had a fine story to tell her."

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